THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Not a Sparrow Falls

June 13, 1999
John M. Buchanan

I believe that when we see Jesus eagerly welcoming the signs of faith among men and women outside the house of Israel; when we see him lovingly welcoming those whom others cast out; when we see him on the cross with arms outstretched to embrace the whole world . . . we are seeing the most fundamental of all realities; namely a grace and mercy and loving kindness which reaches out to every creature.

Lesslie Newbigin
The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

"NOT A SPARROW FALLS"

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

June 13, 1999

Matthew 10:26-31
Genesis 21: 8-21

"Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." Matthew 10:29

O God, we come into your presence as individuals, tied up in our particular lives; worried about the weather and our health and whether or not our neighbors and employers appreciate us; and here in worship you lift us up and show us the whole world you made and nations and races; and you call us to live for a moment in the boundless mystery of eternity and in the presence of you and your love for all your children. So startle us with your truth and open our hearts to your will for us , in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The last time I preached a sermon on the story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave and her son Ishmael, I got in trouble. I was invited to preach at the installation of a friend of mine and she asked me specifically to preach on this story. So I did. It is a big church in the South, the kind of southern Presbyterian institution where on the wall of portraits of past session members and clerks and pastors you can find a few Confederate Generals. It is also the kind of institution that reflects the genuine hospitality and graciousness of its culture. Now I know it's a regional stereotype, but it has been my experience that Yankees are particularly receptive and responsive and vulnerable to Southern graciousness. We love it. After all, we're not often told how wonderful we are and how lovely it is that we came to the party and how fascinating and interesting we are. So I preached a Hagar and Ishmael sermon for my friend and afterward I was utterly enjoying greeting the people and being told how wonderful and fascinating and interesting I was. I noticed a woman who seemed to be waiting until the line was gone. When she greeted me, she took my hand in both of hers and smiled and said with sweetness and sincerity, "Mr. Buchanan, it was lovely of you to come all the way down here from Chicago to be with us this morning. I just wanted you to know that I hated your sermon." She squeezed my hand, smiled sweetly and walked away. And I said, "Thank you very much." So I haven't returned to the text for a decade—although I was subsequently invited back to that wonderful church.

It's hot—this story is—perhaps too hot to handle. Everybody has to hate someone, it seems. Anthropologists and sociologists even argue that we need someone with whom to make unflattering and derogatory comparisons in order to feel good about ourselves and establish our own identity. We need a 'they' who we are not in order to know who we are. We need someone to be an outsider so we can be an insider. Once we buy in, we demonize "them." They're lazy, immoral, undependable, can't trust them, they even smell funny. That's how Catholics and Protestants regarded each other for centuries in Northern Ireland—Greeks and Turks, Jews and Arabs, Serbs and Albanians. And inevitably

religion is brought into play to support the process of demonization. We haven't talked about it much, but as a matter of fact, religion is a major part of what just happened in Yugoslavia. The people who have been driven out of Kosovo are Muslims. The people driving them out are Orthodox Christians. In the Sudan it's the other way around: Muslims are persecuting Christians.

In any event, given this distressing reality about the human story it is now possible to understand what's going on in the Bible when we encounter lists of people who are the "others," the outsiders, the enemy, "them." In Psalm 83, for instance, there is a kind of roll call of the enemies of the people of God: Edom, and Moab, and the Hagrites; Gebal and Amman and Amalek, Philistines and Assyrians—tribes, mostly, and they are not Israel—and, by the way, Ishmaelites, a tribe of marauders that roamed the Southern desert in the second millennium B.C.E. What was peculiar about the Ishmaelites, beyond the fact that they were lazy, undependable, criminal, violent and dangerous, clearly inferior and smelled bad, was that their language was Semitic, amazingly similar to the Hebrew spoken by the twelve tribes of Israel. These people, Ishmaelites, are a lot like us, the Hebrews thought, and therein lies one of the most remarkable and poignant and powerful stories in the Bible.

Abraham and Sarah, promised parents of God's chosen nation, are rich and established and powerful. They have flocks of sheep and goats; they have tents and slaves. Abraham has a harem befitting a man of his station. What Abraham and Sarah do not have is a son and that's a problem if they're going to be the parents of a great nation. So, consistent with custom, Sarah suggests that her favorite slave, Hagar, an Egyptian, might become the mother of Abraham's son. That's what happens. His name is Ishmael. But then something truly unexpected occurs. Sarah has a son and calls him Isaac.

One day Sarah sees Isaac and Ishmael playing together and a terrible thought occurs to her. Why Ishmael is actually Abraham's oldest son. He has status. He has a claim on the family's patrimony. Isaac may be the hero and the point of the biblical narrative, but what in the world are we going to do with Ishmael and Hagar, his mother.

Sarah knows exactly how to deal with the situation. She distances herself from her favorite slave, no longer even uses her name; dehumanizes, demonizes, and then concludes that there is no room for Hagar and Ishmael and they have to go. Abraham is reluctant but ultimately agrees. In a pathetic gesture gives Hagar a little bread and water and throws her out into the desert with her infant son.

In the big picture—the big story which is about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and Rachel—Hagar and Ishmael are unnecessary and expendable. In the wilderness the inevitable happens. The bread and the water run out. Human beings can't survive without water, particularly babies, and so Ishmael starts to die of dehydration. Hagar will die too, but Ishmael is going to die first, in her arms.

Old Testament scholar Phylis Tribble describes the scene powerfully, from the perspective of the woman: "she departed and wandered into the wilderness: she found a place for the child to die: she kept a vigil: and she uttered the phrase, 'the death of the child.' Now, as she sits at a distance from death, she lifts up her own voice and she weeps. Her grief, like

her speech, is sufficient unto itself. She does not cry out to another; she does not beseech God. A madonna alone with her dying child. Hagar weeps." (*Texts of Terror,* p.24)

As the crisis approaches, Hagar cannot bear it. Are there more tragically poignant words than hers—"Let me not see the death of the child"?

Hagar carefully lays the infant under a bush and walks a hundred feet away and sits down and weeps and waits. The baby cries. And then given what is going on with the big picture of Abraham and Isaac and the chosen people and descendants more numerous than the stars, in the middle of that the text makes an astonishing assertion. God hears the cries of the infant.

An angel appears, and did you notice that the angel says what angels are always saying in the Bible—to the shepherds on the Bethlehem hillside, to the weeping woman at the empty tomb—'Do not be afraid—fear not.'? "God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand for I will make a great nation of him. Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink."

Professor Walter Brueggeman, in his classic treatment of the story, observes that "God has this special commitment to Ishmael. For some inscrutable reason, God is not quite prepared to yield easily to his own essential plot. . . God cares about this outsider the tradition wants to abandon. God will remember all the children, like a mother remembers all her children." (Isaiah 49:15)

It's almost as if the Bible is arguing with itself here. The big story is Isaac. But from the very beginning the Bible keeps reminding us that God doesn't forget about the ones who get pushed to the margins or pushed out of the big story. From the very beginning God is passionately committed to the very ones the traditions and customs and laws of God's people exclude. God stands in judgment of the very religious tradition God has inspired.

That's what gets so hot about this story . . .and provocative.

Centuries later Jesus did the same thing; in God's name remembered and reached out to the very people who were being excluded by the customs and traditions and laws of God's people. That's what is going on in the New Testament when he touches a leper, and sits at table with tax collectors and allows a prostitute to pour oil on his feet and talks with women in broad daylight and heals on the sabbath, welcomes the children. In one way or another these people are outsiders—excluded by religion in Jesus' day.

You simply cannot read scripture and avoid the radical inclusivity of God's love. You cannot claim the tradition without claiming the part that judges the tradition's exclusivity. You cannot claim the name of Jesus and ignore his embrace of those his own religion marginalized.

We tried to do it on the basis of race. We gave it our best. Professor Jack Rogers has written a book that shows the biblical and theological contortions the Christian church, and the Presbyterian church in particular, used to rationalize slavery and then

segregation. But it cannot be done, ultimately, thanks be to God. We tried to exclude on the basis of gender and then marital status. Until fairly recently, women and divorced and remarried people were not allowed to be ordained and to serve as pastors. In all of these instances, proponents of exclusion could and did quote scripture to support their positions. And we're at it again, this time not race, or gender or marital status, but sexual orientation.

It is not the only issue. It is not the most important issue. But as Presbyterian gather next week in Fort Worth it will be a dominant and divisive issue. Let me say again, that in light of scripture, not in spite of scripture, we need to be very cautious about who we exclude. It is not a matter of political correctness. It has nothing to do with accommodating the easy amorality of modern culture. It has everything in the world to do with the God who surprises everybody by transcending the tradition; the customs and morés and boundaries and laws of religion and reaches out to include the outsider, the God who hears the cries of the abandoned child.

But that's not even the most important point. This story is about us—about each one of us. Madeleine L'Engle wrote: "If you're going to care about the fall of the sparrow, you can't pick and choose who's going to be the sparrow: It's everybody."*(Christianity Today,* June 16, 1998, cited in *Homiletics,* June 1999)

Not long after the Hagar and Ishmael incident, the tribes of Israel would find themselves in the wilderness. In an interesting twist of historical irony, Hagar's descendants, the Egyptians, will hold the children of Israel as slaves and when they escape they will wander in the wilderness just like Hagar and Ishmael. And just like Hagar and Ishmael they, too, will feel that they have been abandoned, forgotten by God and left to die of hunger and thirst. And like Hagar and Ishmael they will discover in the wilderness that God remembers them. God is with them, God's presence will save them.

There is nothing more devastating than feeling abandoned, forgotten, unappreciated, unaccepted, unwanted. Our earliest and most profound human need is for acceptance and affirmation. We can be warm, dry, well fed and without the affirmation of human contact, physical contact, we wither and die. Our earliest and most profound fear is of rejection and abandonment.

The basic word of faith is that God doesn't forget or abandon. God hears the cries of all the children. God is particularly sensitive to the cries of those who are abandoned by everybody else: those abandoned in God's name, those abandoned for whatever reason: you and me when nothing seems to be working, when life's meaning and passion and purpose have dissolved, when we feel oppressed by our jobs or lack of them, by overwhelming responsibilities or by no responsibilities, by friends, spouses, companions and lovers who disappoint us, God doesn't forget. God shows up in whatever wilderness we find ourselves. God comes to bring water for our thirst and love for our deepest need. God does not abandon or forget.

One time Jesus was preparing his disciples for the frightening future they faced. They would be like sheep in the midst of wolves, he warned. They would be arrested and

dragged into court and beaten. They would be hated by all because of him, a special kind of abandonment.

Do not be afraid, he told them. And then he invoked a powerful metaphor—about sparrows—about not one sparrow falling apart from God's love and compassion and powerful presence. "So do not be afraid," he said. "You are of more value than many sparrows."

That's the good news . . .nothing separates us from God's love. There is no where we can go and nothing that can ever happen to us that pushes us out of the story, marginalizes us, removes us from God's amazing grace and radically inclusive love.

When that love and grace live in an institution; when God's inclusive love is working in a community, lives start changing; life starts to overcome death, rebirth starts to happen, people start to live again, thirst is quenched, life is renewed.

That's what happened to author Anne Lamott in her little Presbyterian church in Marin City, California. She writes:

> "One of our newer members, a man named Ken Nelson, is dying of AIDS, disintegrating before our very eyes . . .Ken has a totally lopsided face, ravaged and emaciated, but when he smiles, he is radiant . . .He says he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus, and us.
>
> There's a woman in the choir named Ranola who is large and beautiful and jovial and black and as devout as can be, who has been a little standoffish toward Ken. She was raised in the South by Baptists who taught her that his way of life—that he—was an abomination. It is hard for her to break through this . . . But Kenny has come to church almost every week for the last year and won almost everyone over. He finally missed a couple of Sundays when he got too weak, and then a month ago he was back, weighing almost no pounds, his face even more lopsided, as if he'd had a stroke. Still, during the prayers of the people, he talked joyously of his life and his decline, of grace and redemption, of how safe and happy he feels these days.
>
> So on this one particular Sunday, for the first hymn, the so-called Morning Hymn, we sang "Jacob's Ladder," which goes, "Every rung goes higher, higher," while ironically Kenny couldn't even stand up. But he sang away sitting down, with the hymnal in his lap. And then when it came time for the second hymn, the Fellowship Hymn, we were to sing "His Eye Is on the Sparrow." The pianist was playing and the whole congregation had risen—only Ken remained seated, holding the hymnal in his lap—and we began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" And Ranola watched Kenny rather skeptically for a moment, and then her face began to melt and contort like his, and she went to his side and bent down to lift him up—lifted up this white rag doll, this scarecrow. She held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And it pierced me." (*Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith,* Anne Lamott, p.64-65)

That, I believe, is what God meant when he created us.

That, I believe was what God wanted to happen with Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Ishmael and Hagar.

That, I believe, is what God wants the church to be about.

And that, I believe, is what God wants each of us to know.

His eye is on the sparrow
And I know he watches me. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE
June 13, 1999
Dana Ferguson
Associate Pastor for Mission

God, you possess all beginnings and all endings. In the morning you are the cradle of the world and in the evening you are the world's comforter. You possess all failings and risings, all living and dying. All of your creation moves to the beat of life and death and rebirth. We sing of sorrows borne despite anguish and of joys known despite fear. We laugh at mistakes made in our weakness and at changes begun in our strength. And, we dream of unknown worlds on the strength of the world we know.

We stand as a people of faith, convinced not by the persuasion of our minds but by the experience of our lives. We are convinced that all is as you say it is - that you do number every hair on every head and see our every step. We believe, O God. But when faith ebbs, we feel the pain of the world, and it spatters into the still waters of our lives. Innocent citizens are caught in the cross fire between malicious leaders and governments. Tornadoes rip through cherished homes and communities. Old friends suffer diseases whose cures are years away. Workers lose the jobs they have held for years, while the unemployed have been turned away so many times they have traded hope for tears. And the children--abused because they wear the wrong color skin, speak the wrong language, live under the wrong flag, worship the wrong god - have no hope to lose.

The list is long, O God. But, in the midst of our sorrows, you are walking, holding hands, lifting up, mending wounds, breathing new life, reviving the old, and inspiring your servants. Your power is evident in communities rebuilding homes and surviving tragedies, in the lives of those who drop all to serve victims and refugees and ailing friends. Our hope is renewed in the promise of peace accords; the remission of illness; the reconciliation of broken relationships. This we believe --that we never walk alone and that each of us is precious to you. In this belief we find strength to remember and respond.

You have numbered us from the first to the last. We pray that you might grant us the compassion to count each one around us as precious. Let us reach to those who stumble, and break their fall. Help us to catch those who are about to faint; and lift up those who are struggling to rise. Grant us, O God, the compassion to weep with those who hurt and rejoice with those who sing your praise, and the courage to help us know the joy with which you bring us into being, and count each of us as precious. Endow us with your gifts, teach us your truths, and make us your people for we pray this and all things in the name of the one who taught the disciples to pray together saying.....(Lord's Prayer)

Portions adapted from *Litanies and Other Prayers*; Phyllis Cole & Everett Tilson; 1989; Abingdon Press.